Wetlands Conservation Policy in Canada: Recommendations by Non-Government Organizations

Results of a Workshop
Sponsored by

The Federation of Ontario Naturalists

and

Environment Canada

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February 1987

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April 1987

PREFACE

The Advisory Workshop on Wetlands Conservation Policy in Canada was called together to reach a common understanding of the issue of wetlands in Canada, to identify obstacles and problems in dealing with the issue, and to suggest solutions or means to overcoming the problems. The ultimate goal was to draft a proposed wetlands policy framework which would be of use to governments in designing and implementing effective wetlands policy in their respective jurisdictions. This document presents the results of that workshop.

The major impetus for the Workshop came through the requirement for the Federal Interdepartmental Committee on Land (ICL), which is charged with implementing the Federal Policy on Land Use, to revise the Policy. It had often been expressed that wetlands are not explicitly covered in the existing policy, and that to include a wetlands policy statement and/or guideline would be an important step in at least federal recognition and action to deal with wetlands problems. Guidance is required to formulate such a policy statement, and this Workshop, bringing together a wide variety of non-government organizations (NGOs) and interest groups, is an important source of such guidance.

Another aspect of the ICL mandate is to serve as the federal focal point for federal/provincial discussion of land use issues. This mandate has led to the creation of the informal Canada Committee on Land Use (CCLU), consisting of representatives from all ten provinces and the federal government who are responsible for land use and land use policy in their jurisdictions. The CCLU, in becoming more active in information exchange, program, policy and research coordination and cooperation, has expressed interest in dealing more directly with national land use issues. Specifically, wetlands has been discussed as an issue that is now ripe for coordinated policy. The results of this Workshop will be of use and guidance to the CCLU in its consideration of possible wetlands policy framework.

It is important to be clear on what "policy" is, and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. Policy is defined as:

> "a collection of principles which indicate intended and acceptable activity or direction for an organization or government."

It is within this definition of policy that this wetlands policy framework is proposed.

I INTRODUCTION

Wetlands Defined

The term wetlands is used collectively to describe permanently or intermittently wet land, shallow water and land-water margins. Wetlands may be fresh, brackish or saline, and are characterised in their natural state by plants and/or animals that are adapted to living in wet conditions.

The Importance of Wetlands and Their Conservation

Wetlands are essential to the well being of Canadians. Wetlands conservation is vital to achieving the objectives of living resource conservation described in the World Conservation Strategy, and to fulfill Canada's international obligations such as the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The objectives of the Strategy (adopted by Canada in 1982) are:

- **Maintenance of essential ecological processes and life-support systems.** Wetlands perform these functions in various ways; some maintain and improve water quality, some regulate flows to reduce flooding and may augment late summer stream flows, and some recharge groundwater supply. Wetlands are important as production and staging areas for migratory birds, as spawning and nursery grounds for fish, and as habitat for a great many invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and plants.

- **Preservation of genetic diversity:** Wetlands play an essential role in maintaining wildlife populations, providing key habitat for a diverse fauna and flora. Wetlands are home to about one third of the wildlife species that have been identified as endangered, threatened or rare by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

- **Sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems:** Many local and provincial/territorial economies rely directly on wetlands resources such as fish and wildlife, plant products and wood. Renewable resources associated with wetlands are central to the traditional subsistence lifestyle of some of Canada's aboriginal peoples. Wetlands also support substantial tourism and recreational opportunities, such as hunting, fishing, bird watching and nature photography.

The Issue

The seriousness of the continuing loss of wetlands demands a new approach to wetlands management in Canada.

At least one-half of the wetlands area in Canada's southern settled areas has been converted from its natural state to support alternative land uses including agriculture, urbanization, industrial development, and recreation. For example, southern Ontario lost 70% of its wetlands between settlement and 1982. The Minnedosa pothole region of southwestern Manitoba has lost 71% of its wetlands between 1928 and 1983 because of clearing and cultivation.

In the northern parts of Provinces and north of 60° latitude hydroelectric and other resource developments threaten to diminish the wetland resource. Wetlands throughout Canada have also been degraded by land use practices which have resulted in vegetation destruction, nutrient and toxin loading, sedimentation, turbidity, and altered flow regimes. As well dredging, intensive aquaculture, logging and acid rain have affected their natural balance.

The disruption of wetlands functions has a high cost; economically, socially and ecologically. The disturbance of their natural balance can destroy critical gene pools required for medical and agricultural purposes, it can affect their ability to naturally improve water quality and it can ruin their use for educational and recreational purposes. The disruption of valuable wetlands must cease, the diversity of remaining wetlands must be retained, and where possible rehabilitation and re-creation of wetlands must be attempted. The obstacles and possible solutions to this issue of quantitative and qualitative loss of wetlands is outlined below.

Obstacles to Wetlands Conservation

A number of obstacles to resolving the issues and to achieving wetlands conservation are identified below .

Absence of Wetlands Conservation Objectives in Government Policies

Federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments have rarely recognized the values of wetlands conservation in their policies and programs. The lack of government direction results in:

- continuing and cumulative wetlands loss, because decisions to convert individual wetlands to other land uses are not subject or related to overall conservation policies;

- a lack of profile for wetlands issues, which results in inadequate attention being paid to wetlands values when land use decisions are made or are subject to review;

- a lack of guidance to decision-makers (federal, provincial, territorial and municipal agencies, landowners) who must balance the advantage and disadvantages of land use decisions; and

- failure to enforce existing legislation and policies where they are in place.

Lack of Coordination and Communication Among Government Agencies

Jurisdiction over wetlands in Canada is spread among federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments, and among different government departments and agencies. None of these myriad of departments and agencies at any level is completely responsible for wetlands management, conservation and sustainable use. Although limited efforts have been made, coordination and communication within and among governments remains inadequate. The need is not for one bureau to look after wetlands, the need is to stress better communications and consistent, enforced policy that is followed by all government agencies.

Too Few Incentives to Conserve Wetlands and Too Many to Convert Them

Incentives programs (government and others) often conflict with wetlands conservation efforts. For example, income and property tax incentives, drainage and diking subsidies, and agricultural production quotas often are strong financial inducements to farmers to convert wetlands to cultivated acreage. Without the inducement, the farmer usually would not convert the wetlands for economic reasons. Conversely, there are few incentives for landowners to maintain wetlands in a natural state. Since the Canadian public generally benefits from wetlands, conservation efforts should be supported by government-funded or sponsored incentives.

Inadequate Management after Acquisition or Retention

Non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and government agencies often have difficulty managing wetlands they have acquired or retained for conservation purposes. Property taxes and personnel costs are often high, and managers are not familiar with methods to raise revenue from the use of wetlands in an ecologically sensitive manner. Long term management, which can be aided by revenue generation, is a growing concern of all wetlands conservation agencies.

Deficiencies in Knowledge and In Its Application

There is limited information about the status, ecological functioning, and value (hydrologic, economic etc.) of Canadian wetlands. Progress has recently been made classifying and developing inventories of wetlands but nationally, the task is not yet complete. Greater effort has to be taken to set goals for numbers and kinds of wetlands needed. Wetlands conversion rates and the economic value of wetlands have not been adequately quantified. The economic, social and ecological costs and benefits of wetlands conversion are as yet poorly understood, but the evidence is mounting that wetlands are economically, as well as ecologically and socially important.

Existing knowledge about wetlands is not well distributed and is not effectively used in influencing land use decisions. While gaps in knowledge about wetlands remain an important obstacle, conservation actions must proceed without waiting for ongoing results from research activities.

Lack of Education Directed to the General Public, Decision-makers and Landowners

Education programs about wetlands are weak, inconsistent and have not stressed the importance of stewardship and wise use of resources. The Canadian public must be informed about the values and benefits of wetlands and the consequences of continuing wetlands loss. Landowners need to know how to improve management of their renewable natural resources to produce sustainable economic benefits. Decision-makers need to learn the importance of wetlands issues, the close relationship between conservation and sustainable economic development, and how to apply ecological understanding to resource planning and management. Education is an interactive process: political leaders, government officials, scientists, landowners, and wetlands users can all learn much from each other about wetlands and their conservation.

Insufficient Involvement of Non-Government Organizations

Governments have not fully recognized past fund raising and conservation efforts of NGOs nor the potential of NGOs to assist in wetlands conservation, although the creation of Wildlife Habitat Canada in 1984 represents one successful initiative. NGOs are able to raise funds from interested publics to defray costs associated with wetlands conservation as well, their administrative costs tend to be lower than governments. Credible NGOs are able to galvanize public support needed to overcome political and bureaucratic roadblocks.

II RECOMMENDED POLICY FRAMEWORK

Objectives

- To ensure that a national wetlands conservation policy as well as any programs formulated under it are linked to other land, soil, water, air and wildlife conservation policies in order to secure the wise use of Canada's wetland ecosystems and meet Canada's international wetlands conservation responsibilities.

- To arrest the loss and to encourage the rehabilitation of Canada's wetlands by:

  a) maintaining the integrity of wetland ecosystems;
  b) preserving the genetic diversity of wetland ecosystems; and
  c) ensuring the enjoyment and economic use of wetland ecosystems is sustainable.

The workshop recommends that the above objectives be encouraged and acted upon by the appropriate federal, provincial, territorial and municipal levels of government through the following policy strategies:

Policy Strategies

1. **CREATE WETLANDS CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES** through the development and coordination of federal, provincial, territorial and municipal wetlands policies; and

   LINK THOSE WETLANDS POLICIES to other land, soil, water, air and wildlife conservation policies to ensure wetland conservation as part of a comprehensive land use strategy.

- Recognize that wetlands are both land and water;

- Clarify government (at all three levels) jurisdictional and legal responsibilities concerning wetlands, particularly those in marine intertidal areas;

- Relate government initiatives and existing policies or guidelines (e.g. "Soil at Risk", "Currents of Change", "North American Waterfowl Management Plan", federal/provincial agriculture policies, "Federal Policy on Fish Habitat Policy, Salmonid Enhancement Program, ERDA forestry andagriculture-food agreements) to wetlands conservation;

- Establish within each province or territory, a process or lines of communication for translating policy recommendations for all agencies involved into reasonable land use decisions at the local level;

- Urge all provinces and territories to develop an overall conservation strategy and to include wetlands conservation as an integral component of that strategy; and

- Make better use of international agreements for conservation (e.g. RAMSAR).

2. **IMPROVE CO-ORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION AMONG GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND NON-GOVERNMENT AGENCIES.**

- Identify at the national level a central or lead agency to orchestrate such co-ordination and communication about wetlands;

- Identify at the provincial/territorial level a central or lead agency to orchestrate such co-ordination and communication about wetlands; and

- Establish a national forum for wetland conservation communications to:

  - systemize i) wetland references
    ii) ecological data on wetlands

  - establish an information clearing house.

3. **RECOGNIZE AND ENCOURAGE THE ROLE AND EFFORTS OF NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS** in conserving wetlands and that, for their part, non-government organizations from all disciplines must assume a strong role in the development and implementation of wetlands conservation programs.

- Provide financial resources for national advisory groups to enable them to assist in the development of policies and/or programs under a strategy for wetlands conservation; and

- Facilitate additional fund raising activities for wetlands conservation (e.g. programs like the Wildlife Habitat Conservation Stamp).

4. **CO-ORDINATE AND RATIONALIZE GOVERNMENT INCENTIVE PROGRAMS** to minimize their adverse affects on wetlands and to encourage wetlands conservation, and

   CREATE LANDOWNER WETLANDS INCENTIVES that will encourage the landowner and conservation agencies to maintain wetlands in a natural state.

- Identify all government incentive programs which influence or impact wetlands;

- Identify and assess the influence that such programs are having on wetlands and agricultural lands;

- Remove government incentives for unnecessary diking, drainage, or filling;

- Ensure that environmental impact assessments are conducted on significant government and non-government drainage, diking, and filling programs.

- Examine tax relief for wetlands through investigating both the United States of America federal and state programs and Canadian federal, provincial and municipal programs;

- Institute at the appropriate government level, tax relief or other incentive programs that will encourage landowners to retain wetlands: and

- Recognize the necessity to landowners of compensation for wetlands retention in many localities.

5. **ENSURE PROPER MAINTENANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF THESE WETLANDS** after designation/acquisition and/or retention.

- Ensure that adequate financial and manpower resources are provided within federal, provincial, territorial and municipal budgets for the management of national and protected wetlands areas;

- Provide enabling policy and legislative change to facilitate fund raising (both voluntary and involuntary) activities that can be used by government and non-government organizations to conserve wetlands, such as:

  - income tax refund check-off program
  - mortgage relief system
  - conservation easements
  - excise tax on outdoor recreation equipment
  - surcharge on hunting, trapping and fishing licences
  - land banking fund
  - redirection of land sales revenues;

- Encourage non-government organizations to retain ownership of more of the wetlands they purchase and use them to the greatest extent possible to raise funds, through;

  - crop production (wild rice, craft material, aquaculture)
  - leasing revenues (agriculture, hunting or trapping, and recreational viewing and study of plants and animals);

- Support the education of scientific/technical administrative communities to innovative land retention and land management mechanisms; and

- Encourage the involvement of volunteers in wetlands management.

6. **CLOSE GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE** that currently exist in wetland classification, inventory, research and evaluation and ensure the proper synthesis, storage and retrieval needed to access this knowledge.

- Address areas such as:
  - socioeconomic evaluation
  - hydrology
  - environmental and ecological cost/benefit accounting
  - inventory and classification systems and application
  - impacts of government programs
  - restoration and rehabilitiation, and mitigation of and/or compensation for loss of wetlands.

7. **IMPROVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

- Present wetlands conservation in combination with soil, land, water, air and wildlife conservation in an ecological context rather than in isolation;
- Emphasize adult/decision maker education programs in addition to those of school children;
- Utilize national communications opportunities (e.g. public service announcements, videos, bus signs) to advertise wetlands conservation;
- Broaden agricultural extension programs like SWEEP (Soil and Water Environmental Enhancement Program, Ontario) and HELP (Habitat Enhancement Land-Use Program, Manitoba) to develop wetland conservation awareness;
- Encourage peer networking through use of landowner participation signs or similar awareness techniques; and
- Use IUCN "Introduction to World Conservation Strategy" to assist decision makers with global context for wetlands conservation.

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